Pakenham Springs Primary School prides itself on being a genuine learning community. The school opened in 2008 and achieved Performance and Development Culture (P&D Culture) accreditation in the same year. The school was designed to be the hub of this fast expanding outer suburb 50 kilometres from Melbourne and predominantly serves a new community of first home buyers. The school grounds house a primary school, a kindergarten for pre-schoolers, a maternal child health centre and an occasional care program. 253 students were enrolled when the school opened in February 2008 and enrolments have increased to over 580 students for the commencement of the 2010 school year.

Pakenham Springs’ principal, Colin Sloper, was the school’s sole employee for six months prior to its opening. Although this meant Colin faced enormous challenges, it allowed him to develop a strong vision of the school culture he wanted to build. “Overseeing the development of the buildings was the least of my worries in a way”, explains Colin. “I knew the most important concern was the culture I wanted to develop.” Colin wanted to create a school with an ingrained culture of improvement, particularly in terms of instructional practice. To do this he knew he would need to encourage openness to new ideas, privilege critical thinking, encourage responsible risk-taking to try new ideas and ensure inquiry was at the basis of learning for students and staff alike. The P&D Culture initiative supported Colin to establish such a culture by enabling him to instil in his staff an understanding of the importance of collaboration and reflection, a collective and consultative approach to decision making and the development of leadership capacity and instructional leadership within the school.

Establishing a new school meant Colin was able to select staff who would share his vision for the school. He developed clear staff job descriptions and role statements that outlined the school’s intended direction and the attributes staff would require to be effective, such as: ‘consciousness’ – an awareness of, and responsiveness to, their surroundings and their own actions; ‘craftsmanship’ - striving for excellence in teaching and constantly improving their craft; ‘efficaciousness’ – having the capacity to make a difference and taking responsibility to ensure this happens; flexibility – trying new things and respecting various perspectives; ‘interdependency’ – working as a team member
and sharing and contributing to professional relationships and learning. Above all, their approach to learning and teaching was the unquestionable focus.

Colin wanted P&D Culture to set the scene for the way things were going to work at Pakenham Springs. Part of his vision was an environment in which decision making would be collaborative and consultative and the whole school community would contribute to building on his initial vision and making it a reality. Once Colin’s team was appointed, all staff were engaged in shaping the school’s vision and direction. “To build a culture, you have to unite the people – that was the first task, and we did that by making sure everyone had input into decisions and we focused on communications. No one was left out. Everyone’s opinion counted, and we created this together”, Colin explains.

Colin and his team used the P&D Culture Elements as their foundation in undertaking a culture building and establishment exercise using five guiding questions to focus their discussions:

- What is our collective sense of what our school could and should be like?
- What traditions, rituals and ceremonies could we use to exemplify our culture?
- What stories about our schools truly articulate our shared values and the culture we seek?
- What conflicts, disputes and problems do we need to resolve to shape values?
- How can we link our values and beliefs with daily routines and behaviours so as to reinforce our vision?

The staff found the P&D Culture Self Assessment Framework assisted them to define the kind of culture they wanted to establish and provided useful direction and pointers for preparing for the P&D Culture accreditation process. According to Colin, “We didn’t want it to be just ticking the boxes– it had far more potential as a tool to assist us to create a vision”.

The school’s P&D Culture gradually developed in accordance with their guiding vision and planning, with a high value placed on consultation, collaboration and collective decision making. Staff relationships developed and smaller working teams were formed. “We had ongoing long professional discussions, debates and disagreements about how we would do things – but we aimed at getting consensus. Staff meetings and professional learning community meetings had to be very ‘hands-on’ through necessity.” The school community formed a strong opinion that a P&D Culture would apply to
everyone, not just school-based staff. As such, students are encouraged to contribute their opinions and education is perceived as a partnership between school-based personnel and parents.

The importance placed on collaboration and communication means that staff are inducted into the ways in which the school’s staff work collectively and the school’s basic beliefs. They are immediately accepted as professional peers whose opinions and ideas are appreciated for what they bring to teaching and learning. Their contribution is valued and there is no sense of authority or standing based on the length of service in the school. Every graduate teacher has a mentor for extra support.

The school has embedded a collaborative approach to improving instructional practice and teachers consult and plan together in year level clusters for student learning improvement. For instance, an emphasis on explicit teaching has been agreed upon as a result of staff collectively reflecting on how they could best assist students in knowing whether they had attained learning goals. “Everything we do is explicit”, says Colin. “Everything is transparent. From planning to thinking to peer observation and having open classrooms – everything is open to scrutiny so that we can always improve and get feedback on what we’re doing.”

Feedback is integral to the school’s P&D Culture processes, with the school community working together to improve instructional practice through peer observation. The principal models the approach to learning and improvement expected of all in the school community and has participated in an intensive cognitive coaching course to ensure that this program is integrated into the school’s culture. Teachers have been trained in giving and receiving constructive feedback through the school’s ongoing collaborative and reflective culture focus. In addition, each Learning Community Leader has been trained in cognitive coaching principles and worked with a coach during 2008 to enhance their skills in this area.

The school runs a formal Peer Observation program for all teaching staff once a term in which teachers observe, and are observed by, colleagues from within and outside their own sub-school. These formal sessions follow a set format and focus on the professional learning staff have been undertaking to ensure it is embedded in teachers’ instructional practice. The program is valued by the teachers as providing an opportunity for collaborative reflection and feedback and is supported by teacher release time. The next focus of professional learning for the school is the use of the e5 Instructional Model as a mechanism to continue the development the school’s instructional practice.
In addition to feedback from peer observation, data from multiple sources is used to inform improvement strategies for individual, team and collective instructional practice. Data is considered a whole school responsibility and is collectively owned and analysed, with discussion and analysis undertaken at team, leadership and whole school levels. Where possible, results are also individualised, for instance data from the *Student Attitudes to School* survey is entered manually at the school enabling teachers to receive data for their individual classes.

The school’s collective approach to decision making has contributed to a culture in which individuals have a high level of internal accountability. The school’s leading teachers have the role of monitoring and overseeing the work of each sub-school as they plan, work, assess and evaluate in clusters at the year level. However, the professionalism of the teaching teams turns the role into one of guidance and facilitation. According to Ingrid Lange, a leading teacher, “The teams are professionals – they work hard and that’s their decision. It’s the way every team works – there’s no big stick.”

Each teacher and education support officer takes responsibility for their own learning and practice and has an individual plan for their development. The school puts a high value on developing the capacity of staff and, following the success of the Teacher Professional Leave (TPL) for the leading teachers, there is a goal of increasing the instructional leadership capacity of the school’s cluster leaders.

Pakenham Springs’ achievement of being P&D Culture accredited in its inaugural year of operation affirmed the P&D Culture practices Colin and his team had worked hard to embed in all areas of the school from its inception. However, as Colin reflects, a school’s P&D Culture needs to be continually monitored and strengthened, and the release of the *Revised Self Assessment Framework* will assist schools to do this. “Our accreditation confirmed we were on the right track, but a Performance and Development Culture shouldn’t be something you do and forget about. It should reflect the way you are. If that’s the case, there’s not much work involved – it’s all in place and the school can celebrate accreditation as an achievement and an endorsement. It confirms and supports what people believe and do – and the school continues to grow, develop and improve.”